



**Panel's title : Understanding prenatal and postnatal gender discrimination at its origin: a multidisciplinary analysis of son preference**

**Coordinator**: Laura Rahm (CEPED/Université Paris Descartes)

**Language** : English

**Topics** : Anthropology, Sociology, Demography, Economics, Politics

**Panel presentation :**

The preference for sons is rooted in the kinship norms of several Asian countries. For centuries couples have been seeking to ensure the birth of a male heir by continuing childbearing until a boy was born. Daughters are often provided with fewer resources for survival compared to their brothers, which is reflected in excess female child mortality. The advent of ultrasound examination has opened a new path for gender discrimination, allowing couples to detect the sex of the fetus prior to birth and to abort unwanted girls. Prenatal sex selection has become common in several Asian countries, leading to a demographic distortion detected through high sex ratios at birth. These forms of pre- and postnatal gender discrimination have resulted in over 135 million missing females today, mainly in Asia.

The objective of the proposed panel is to analyze different dimensions of son preference in order to grasp the complexity of this cultural feature and its implications on fertility and familial behaviors. Hence, a multidisciplinary and cross-country/comparative approach is adopted. The panel starts with an anthropological/ethnographic overview on the cultural components of son preference in India. It proceeds with a demographic analysis of measuring son preference in Vietnam, in which we highlight the role of parity progression ratios according to the sex composition of previous children. Subsequently, a socio-economic analysis sheds light on the underpinnings of son preference on a global scale. Econometric modeling shows how different manifestations of son preference (i.e. pre- and postnatal sex selection) are associated with different levels of socio-economic and gender development. Finally, the panel presents a review of public policies that directly alleviate or indirectly contribute to son preference in South Korea, India and Vietnam. Beyond that, the panel analyzes political masculinities and the discourse by policy makers stressing the importance of a political culture that empowers women rather than patronizing them.

*Key words: gender-biased sex selection; son preference; gender discrimination; anthropology; demography; socio-economic analysis; policy analysis;*



## **Participants :**

- 1) Clémence Jullien (LESC/Paris Nanterre University)

### **Expressing son preference in India: between acknowledgement and denial**

**Language :** English

#### **Presentation :**

According to the 2011 Census result, the child sex ratio has dipped further in India, proving that son preference and sex selective abortions persist within the country. This is despite the fact that since 1996 the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act has been implemented to forbid sex determination. In addition, both governmental and non-governmental agencies have undertaken extensive awareness-raising campaigns over the past two decades to counter sex selection and raise the value of the girl child. How have these efforts influenced peoples' expressions of son preference?

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in an obstetric government hospital in Rajasthan, this presentation focuses on the ambivalence with which patients and attendants manifest son preference. The presentation shows that, on the one hand, it has become too shameful for people to publically acknowledge son preference, while on the other hand, son preference seems to be common among women from all classes and castes. Indeed, while women follow different methods to conceive a boy, they tend to justify themselves and hold others accountable for son preference.

*Key words :* India, son preference, child sex ratio, hospital, legitimization, responsibility, Rajasthan.

- 2) Valentine Becquet (CEPED/IRD)

### **Modelling son preference in Vietnam: parity progression ratios according to the sex of previous children**

**Language :** English

#### **Presentation :**

Son preference in Vietnam is a complex and ancient topic, whose implications are yet contemporary. The birth of a son offers familial and social recognition. Symbolically, sons embody the transmission of patrilineage. Socially, sons protect the family's reputation. For centuries, parents have sought to ensure the birth of a son by continuing childbearing until a boy is born.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a new strategy emerged with the availability of sex selection technologies (ultrasound and abortion). Especially in the context of low fertility, some parents resort to the prenatal sex selection in favor of boys. The phenomenon has been recent in comparison to other Asian countries such as China or India, but rapid. There are currently 113 male births for 100 female births at the national level. Yet, important regional variations exist in the degree of sex imbalances. These variations are partly associated with differences in fertility and prosperity levels, but are mainly a reflection of the intensity of son preference.

In order to provide a detailed analysis of son targeting fertility behaviour in Vietnam, this presentation builds on parity progression ratios (PPRs) according to the sex composition of siblings. This indicator measures the intensity of son preference, by calculating to what extent parents adapt their fertility behaviour in order to ensure the birth of a son. Through Kaplan-Meier estimators and Cox models, we will see that the "revealed preference" for sons is stronger in Northern regions, among richer and more educated couples, and in rural areas.

*Key words :* son preference ; fertility behaviour; parity progression ratios ; Vietnam



- 3) Sara Tafuro (CEPED/Université Paris Descartes)

### **Socio-economic and gender underpinnings of son preference**

**Language** : English

**Presentation** :

Son preference has been influencing fertility and familial behaviors for centuries. Prenatal sex selection has received growing attention, both for its rising scale and for its paradoxical character: unlike son-targeting continued childbearing and postnatal discrimination, abortions of female fetuses are often practiced among the well-off, who use technological supply and women's reproductive rights to their favor. Which role do the economic development and the gender development at the societal level play in the persistence of son preference?

A macro-level econometric analysis tests the same gender and socio-economic correlates on indicators of (a) prenatal discrimination (i.e. sex ratio at birth depicting the prevalence of sex selective abortions) and (b) post-natal discrimination (i.e. excess female mortality under 5 years of age reflecting the extent of daughters' neglect). A large sample is collected in order to adopt a global perspective.

The results suggest that while postnatal discrimination is associated with restricted women's freedom and agency at the societal level, countries affected by prenatal sex selection show greater levels of living standards and gender participation, yet lack social security and protection schemes for their citizens. These preliminary results build on the hypothesis that sons are still needed in Asian families as a form of insurance against income vulnerability.

*Key words* : son preference ; econometric analysis; prenatal discrimination ; postnatal discrimination ; income vulnerability ; Asia ;

- 4) Laura Rahm (CEPED/Université Paris Descartes)

### **Son Preference, Politics and Policy in Asia**

**Language** : English

**Presentation** :

Several Asian governments have issued laws and policies to counter one of the more pervasive forms of gender discrimination today: the deliberate elimination of females before or shortly after birth due to a preference for sons. On the one hand, much headway has been done to challenge traditional hierarchies in the society through social, political and legal reforms. On the other hand, public policies and political discourse have played a significant role in inadvertently creating or reinforcing son preference, and thus have contributed to the persistence of condescending attitudes and practices towards girls. This presentation highlights the linkages between son preference, politics and policies in Asia. It draws from existing literature, policy file analysis, and semi-structured interviews conducted with policy makers during field research in South Korea, India and Vietnam between 2014 and 2015. While South Korea witnessed a near inversion of gender preferences within the last decade linked to social change and accompanied by legal reforms, son preference remains pervasive throughout different parts of India and Vietnam today. Gender equity laws and equal access to inheritance, property and lineage create an enabling environment for women, but are often undermined through discriminatory attitudes and practices. Especially in India, political masculinities undermine government's own efforts in challenging son preference.

*Key words* : son preference ; public policies ; Asia ; political masculinities